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KAZAKHSTAN

CASE STUDY

Aral Sea Fishermen Return to Their Craft

USAID restores fishing industry in the Aral Sea environmental disaster area.



The Kambala-Balyk fish processing plant in Aralsk is now busy year round. Photo: USAID

To create employment in the Aral Sea area, USAID and the Israeli International Development Agency rehabilitated a fish hatchery and improved the production capacity at a local fish processing facility.

Challenge

Three decades ago, the Aral Sea in Central Asia was the world's fourth largest inland body of water. Today, due to Soviet-era policies that favored water-intensive crops such as cotton and rice, it is one of the world's worst environmental disaster areas. The level of the water has dropped by some 12 meters, reducing its surface area by half and tripling its salinity. The result is a major environmental disaster affecting Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as well as Kyrgyzstan Republic and Tajikistan: Entire ecosystems have been decimated, there is no more commercial fishing, and agricultural productivity has been greatly reduced due to increased soil salinity and climatic aridity.

Initiative

To help restore employment opportunities for the local population, USAID and the Israeli International Development Agency MASHAV cooperatively implemented a joint assistance program, aimed at reviving fishing industry from 2001-2005. The program focused on rehabilitating a fish hatchery by Lake Kambash in village of Kosjar near the Aral Sea, and improving the production capacity at the Kambala-Balyk fish processing facility in the city of Aralsk.

To increase the local ownership for the program, USAID and MASHAV cooperated with the largest self-sustaining NGO in Kazakhstan. Together with the NGO, the program purchased ice machines, freezers, processing equipment, and cooling trucks for the processing facility. USAID helped to establish marketing services at the fishery, conduct a market research, and create a data base of the buyers. Training was provided on how to improve product quality, reach more distant markets, and negotiate higher prices.

Result

The reconstructed fish hatchery produces over 10 million larvae a week for the repopulation and enrichment of the fresh water lakes and streams around the Aral Sea. The facility employs 50 staff and is now operating successfully under the management of local specialists, while its maintenance costs are funded by the Government of Kazakhstan. The fish, when reintroduced into the natural environment, serves as the basis for developing the fishing industry in the region. Meanwhile, using the refrigerator trucks, fishermen can bring their catch, from the sea itself, to the plant throughout the year, where it is processed and kept in excellent condition even during the hottest summer months. Due to improved marketing, the processed fish reaches more distant markets, providing quality food to local populations.